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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, contest persuasive speaking has become a product that student competitors produce and perform. A perversion of the contest formula has removed the element of persuasion from the formula. Competition rules suggest that a student's purposes in participating in forensics events should include inspiring, reinforcing, or changing the audience's beliefs, attitudes, values, or actions. Similarly, motives of judges/critics should include student effectiveness in such tasks. In recent years, participants have objectified persuasive speaking practices and evaluation to a point that removes audience responsibility for persuasive involvement. Judges deconstruct student messages without asking if those messages are persuasive. A close examination of some competitive speech texts shows that a focus on the message as product emphasizes logical appeals and disregards immediate effects on the audience. The loss of audience orientation limits student learning about persuasion. To restore student awareness of persuasion and audience, judges and coaches must recognize the persuasive transaction as a process. Students should be encouraged to speak about subjects to which they feel connected and to share the connection with the audience. Forensics educators do their students the greatest disservice if they fail to assure that students know how to use the tools of communication responsibly. (SG)

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Formula vs. Fractured Formula in Contest Persuasive Speaking

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Todd Ambs, a 1980 Interstate Oratory Contest finalist, spoke prophetically about what is today, the state of contest persuasive speaking:

> So often, those of us in forensics use persuasive ploys instead of getting right to the heart of the problem. As a result, we tend to perform instead of persuade. And you in turn as an audience listen, but don't hear. Please, if you do nothing else today, hear what I am saying. (Todd Ambs, "The Silent Killer," Winning Orations, 1980, p. 48)

Ambs warned us then of an omninous shift in the fundamental nature of contest persuasion, one that has damaged the uniqueness and power of contemporary persuasive speaking in forensics. Persuasive speaking, as it evolved over the past decade, has become a product that student competitors produce and perform, a message-centered artifact that audience members (judges and students alike) evaluate as message-centered argument. A number of factors have contributed to a perversion of the "formula" of contest persuasive speaking, a perversion that **removes** the element of **persuasion as a communication process** from the formula. After an exploration of the assumptions that underpin a rhetorical perspective of persuasive speaking and a review of relevant forensic scholarship about the trends in contest persuasion, I will examine some particular speeches given over the last decade at the Interstate Oratory Contest in order to illuminate this shift in emphasis.

Education in rhetorical theory and criticism helps students and practioners of communication remain cognizant of the need to find focus as a critic or communicator. Finding focus involves

an understanding of the process-product (i.e., speaker-audience-message) relationship in rhetorical transactions. As Robert Scott and Bernard Brock note in the second edition of Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective, "Does rhetoric refer to the process of inducing cooperation or to the product of that process? The obvious answer is that it refers to both, but the answer does not reduce the ambiguity. Historically and currently, the word [rhetoric] has been and is used in both senses" (p. 17). Scott and Brock continue this line of thought by speculating on the impact of adhering to a historically grounded notion of product:

> But the very idea of product, as traditional as it is for the critic, may be detrimental to the deepest fulfillment of the critical impulse if it is taken as a limit. This conclusion is especially apparent if one follows carefully the implications of the existence of any product, say an ordinary public speech. Where does the speech start? Where does it end? Does it start in the mind of the speaker as he interacts with his social and physical environment? (p. 17)

Scott and Brock make a crucial point: the assumptions we make about the nature and function of "an ordinary public speech" in a sense empower us to comprehend or attend to certain particulars of, about, or within that speech. These same assumptions may also limit our ability to identify and understand other important variables of a rhetorical transaction.

Contemporary rhetorical theory and critical practices demonstrate an assumption of public discourse as the "human effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols" (p. 16), and remind us that cooperation emerges from the interaction between speaker, message, and audience. These notions are

important because they suggest in contemporary forums like the competitive speaking round, students and judges have responsibilities that go beyond applying the rules of the event or assigning ranks and rating points. Charles Larson points out in the sixth edition of Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992), that the "focus in persuasion is not on the source, the message, or the receiver. It is on **all** (sic) of them equally" (p. 11). Larson agrees with Scott and Brock's understanding of communicative transactions as cooperative processes and argues: "the idea of co-creation means that what is inside the receiver is just as important as the source's intent or the content of the message. Persuasion is the result of the combined efforts of source and receiver" (p. 11).

Whether it is named Persuasion, Persuasive Speaking, or Oratory, it is clear that forensic professionals have articulated clear goals in event rules. The meaning and operationalization of these rules are relevant to ferreting out responsibilities that all participants have in the competitive persuasive speaking transaction. The AFA-NIET rules for Persuasive Speaking read: "An original speech by the student designed to inspire, reinforce, or change the beliefs, attitudes, values or actions of the audience" (AFA-NIET Invitation, 9/21/91, "Description of Events"). NFA I.E. Nationals rules, and those of the Interstate Oratory Contest are highly similar. The process implications that Larson refers to are clear in event rules: a student's purpose in participating in this event ought to contain at least

an element of motive related to inspiring, reinforcing, or changing the beliefs, attitudes, values or actions of the audience. Similarly, given receiver responsibilities in persuasion, motives of judges/critics ought to involve addressing a given student's effectiveness in inspiring, reinforcing, or changing the beliefs, attitudes, values or actions of the audience members--that audience includes the critic/judge. Contemporary forensics practices suggest that we have lost this dimension of competitive persuasive speaking. The loss should frighten us because it is the dimension that makes this event unique in the realm of forensics. Participants have objectified persuasive speaking practices and evaluation to a point that removes audience responsibility for persuasive involvement. Contemporary practices allow me--as a judge--for example, to deconstruct a student's message without asking myself "was I persuaded?" The following discussion of some recent literature relevant to contest persuasion will highlight how and why this state evolved.

In a 1983 study of "dread disease" orations, I concluded that the power of this type of competitive speech grew from the relationship between subject matter and ethos for both the orator and the audience" (p. 133). Specifically, these orators "succeed in eliciting a two-pronged response from the audience and/or the judge: the listeners find themselves in a role that involves more than functioning as a critic of the students' command of the principles of persuasive speaking, they are compelled to consider

the ways that the speech content bears on their own lives" (p. 133). "The student then continues to build his or her credibility by using proof that reinforce audience involvement: examples and illustrations, especially the case study, attach an individual human element to evidence like statistics and expert testimony; claims about disease and its effects are presented as audience-specific in the speech's organization; and audience action is called for in a way that illustrates specific benefits for both unseen victims of the disease and the immediate audience" (pp. 133-134). The implication of this statement is that good persuasive speaking in forensic competition involves regarding rhetoric as process, and persuasion as audience centered.

Sellnow and Ziegemueller highlighted a disturbing trend in competitive oratory in a 1986 National Forensic Journal article. They compared Interstate Oratory Contest speeches from the 1960s and 1980s. They discovered that the 1980s speeches demonstrated a greater percentage of speech dedicated to the solution. More text space was dedicated to a plan, call to action and visualization in the 1980s. The orations of the 1960s demonstrated more space used to develop plan meet need arguments. Speakers of the 1980s spent more time describing the various steps they endorsed for solving their speeches' problems, and the 1980s speeches place more emphasis on logical criteria. Sellnow and Ziegemueller suggest that while this message centered approach to oratory is not necessarily bad, "It would be

unfortunate, however, if too much of the emotional quality of 'Old fashioned oratory' were lost. A persuasive speech should be something more than a well-delivered first affirmative debate speech" (p. 87). Please note that Sellnow and Ziegemueller use the language of debate and argumentation to explain their findings. The language choice reflects their conclusion that orations in the 1980s appear to be formal debate constructive speeches, messages that emphasize logos, rationality, and prescriptiveness at the expense of ethos and pathos, and with a disregard for immediate audience effects.

Scott L. Jensen's research into the nature and function of ballot comments in public speaking events support the contentions of Ziegemueller and Sellnow from another perspective, the audience, in contest persuasion. Jensen's essay, "A Contest Analysis of Public Address Critiques: In Search of Uniqueness in Evaluative Criteria and Judging Practices" (National Forensic Journal, 8 (Fall, 1990), confirms the shift to message focused, product-oriented judging criteria--to which, of course, students and coaches respond in kind when preparing and revising speeches. He found that comments based on the content of public address speeches dominate the attention of critics, and most of those comments are directed toward the original nature of what is presented and the construction of arguments.

The speeches students give in competition and the criteria that judges use to analyze public address events like persuasive speaking suggest that forensics participants assume a product-

focused perspective on the persuasive transaction. This assumption leads to a critical focus on the message (the speech itself), an emphasis on logical appeals and rational thought, a disregard for immediate effects on the audience, and an overall regard for the enterprise of persuasive speaking as justificatory instead of cooperatively achieved. How and why did this shift in emphasis take hold? A closer examination of some competitive speech texts may reveal some answers to this question.

First, the development of a combination thesis statement-preview convention in persuasive speaking has had a profound impact on the tone of the speeches judges critique at tournaments. The "thesis statement-preview" first surfaced in competition in the event called Informative (nee Expository) speaking. When it comes to Persuasion, constructing such an animal is not necessarily difficult, but students have a hard time bridging the stylistic gap between articulating the major points of the speech--an informative demand stylistically--and presenting those same points as support for the claim that the thesis of the speech makes. Instead of persuasion in these speeches emerging or evolving cooperatively, persuasive intent and effect becomes a non-issue. Students do not acknowledge persuasive intent, and they do not encourage audience members to engage. Furthermore, in many of the cases examined for this essay, the students' role in the process, and the purposes for which they give these speeches, are not articulated even subtly. There is a clear lack of acknowledgment of speaker--message--

audience interaction in contest persuasions.

Tim Sellnow presented "A Missing Beat" at the 1982 Interstate Oratory Contest (Winning Orations, 1982, pp. 45-47). The subject matter of his oration was the development of the artificial heart. Tim claims in the speech that the FDA made a bad decision in refusing to allow the use of the Artificial Heart device:

> My goal today is to prove to you that the FDA is making a grave mistake by holding up the therapeutic application of the artificial heart. To do so, first I'll explain the Artificial Heart's function. Second, I'll present the FDA's arguments against the artificial heart along with upholding arguments by the heart's backers. Finally, I'll offer practical solutions to this problem.

Observe that Sellnow states his specific purpose explicitly in the form of persuasive goals, a choice not common to most contest persuasions. But, the rest of the text points to some glaring symptoms of the problems articulated in the previous paragraphs. Sellnow mixes persuasive types. His persuasive goal suggests an advocacy speech, one that proves a particular condition or perspective is reasonable. He says as much in his goal statement. The preview, on the other hand, points quite clearly to a problem-solution organization, a pattern not called for by the requirements of the claim. Sellnow assumes that audience members know a problem exists. The conventions of contemporary competitive persuasion in 1982 (explicit in the AFA-NIET rules at that time) demanded that a student present a problem-solution speech. The message also utilizes a passive, informative verbal style to preview the speech body. The upcoming body, which

should be presented in active terms as proof for his claim that the FDA should encourage the use of the Artificial Heart (which he leaves only implicit) is presented as information for the audience to absorb, not as persuasive proof.

"Justice and the Balance", presented by David G. Levasseur (Winning Orations, 1988, 50-52), examines the problem of overtly adversarial behavior on the part of lawyers:

> Obviously, our courts and their adversaries, are going too far, and if justice is to prevail, then we must curtail the adversarial nature of our legal system. By first, confronting two of the crimes which result in an overly adversarial system, and then by mandating specific judicial reforms, we can perhaps balance the scales of justice once again.

Levasseur implies an actuative goal in sentence one, but he does not clarify his persuasive purpose or goals. He uses legal terminology to stylize the thesis and preview, but the language effectively nullifies presentation of the upcoming speech as actively persuasive. In effect, Levasseur is informing us of problems and solutions versus actively engaging an audience in a persuasive process.

Although no contest rules explicitly outlined organizational or structural parameters in the late 1980s, these conventions were now fully ingrained in the minds of students, coaches and judges. "The Best is Yet to Be" was presented by John R. Mietus, Jr. at the Interstate Oratory Contest in 1987 (Winning Orations, 1987, 54-57). The subject of this speech was the financial effects of catastrophic illness:

> Congressional investigators estimate 20 million Americans today are victims of catastrophic illness, an illness which

> ultimately bankrupts its victims. ...you may be asking, why isn't there a program to help? That's a good question, and a complex one. Let's take a look at the misconceptions hindering a national catastrophic illness program, and then turn to the remedies available to make the last of life worth looking forward to.

The presentation of the content of this speech stylistically is clearly informative. Phrases like "let's take a look at" or "and then turn to" are informative in nature and function, especially when used in structural previews. In this speech, no persuasive claim surfaces until paragraph 14 in the text, but that misplacement is less disturbing than the clear lack of persuasive intent and the informative language style.

The "well-delivered first affirmative constructive" tendency that Sellnow and Ziegemueller document surfaces full-blown in another speech given at the 1987 contest, "Mixing your Medicine with Your Meals", by Anne Demo (Winning Orations, 1987, pp. 113-115). The subject matter of Demo's speech was the improper use of medication:

> These statistics indicate that Americans are not taking their medications correctly and one of the reasons for these errors is a simple lack of information. To understand the potential harm of prescription and over-the-counter medications, let's explore, first, the problem of drug and nutrient interaction; second, how we can become a more informed medication-user; and finally, how we can support legislation to promote consumer education covering prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

This speaker assumes audience acceptance of some problem (at least three are implied: Americans aren't taking their medications correctly, drug and nutrient interaction, and inadequate information provided to consumers about drugs they consume) and it assumes acceptance of actuation in the phrasing

of the last clause, "how we can support legislation to promote consumer education...". Examining this speech reminded me of a comment made by a colleague a few years ago: Persuasive speaking had become no more than a seven minute informative with a three minute solution step tacked on at the end. If the speeches he evaluated in competitive rounds were at all similar in presentation to this one, his conclusion was well supported by evidence.

The examples above serve as fair documentation of the impact that an evaluative shift to product-focused persuasion has had on competitive speeches. And, I contend that this shift is bad in that it removes the audience--especially critics and judges--as a persuasive target. Yet this is not the worst of the disservice to persuasive speaking as an enterprise.

If forensics is an educational enterprise, then the demands of a product approach to persuasion also limits what student speakers are learning about persuasion as a phenomenon. Remember that Larson's view of persuasion involves focus on the source, the message, and the receiver **equally**. Removing the audience as a target has also negatively impacted on the students' understanding of their relationship to the message and the audience. One more example should illustrate how the product assumption hampers and limits a student's inventional freedom. Mike Stolts gave "An Ounce Worth Pounds" in 1987 (Winning Orations, 1987, pp.. 127-130). The subject of his speech was childhood obesity:

> Obesity is potentially the most dangerous, yet possibly preventable childhood health problem.
>
> In order to understand and combat childhood obesity, we must first realize how widespread and dangerous the problem is. Then we will examine why more children are becoming obese. Finally, we will determine what we as parents, future parents, educators and citizens must do to insure that future generations will not grow up obese.

Stolts' approach here is not too objectified. His purpose in addressing the audience is semi-explicit in the second sentence. His call to action is explicit in sentence four; Stolts' persuasive goals are clear. There is an activity to the word choice that does not appear in many contest persuasions. Stolts includes the audience through the use of tense, active pronouns and words like "realize", "examine", and "determine". I coached this speech and I vividly recall the discussions (and disagreements) we had about how he might engage the audience without stepping too far outside of the conventions of the event at the time. Our dilemma, and the ultimate irony, was that Mike was a "fat kid," his coach was a "fat kid," and many of the members of the audiences he addressed were fat kids. He was engaged with his subject, he wished to engage his audience, but convention kept him from doing so explicitly. He would not (and could not) say "I was a fat kid, and maybe you were, too" because by that time, that sort of ethotic appeal was taboo--at one point I clearly recall some coaches tell me they deemed that appeal unethical. What lessons are students learning about persuasion when ethotic appeals like establishing a source's relationship to his or her subject are regarded as ethically suspect, unfair, and overtly discouraged through ballot commentary and low ranking?

Jensen's findings about ballot criteria clearly indicate that students have enough to worry about without having their role in the persuasive transaction perverted. Students can gain an awareness of persuasion as cooperation and retain their inventional integrity if judges and coaches again begin to recognize--through judging criteria and coaching practices--the persuasive transaction as a process. In our classrooms, and in society at large, we speak of the "art of persuasion". It is long past time that the artistic dimension again emerges in competitive persuasive speaking.

There are ways that coaches and judges can wrestle persuasive speaking back from mechanical conventions. First, we should encourage students to speak about subjects to which they feel connected (and as audience members, we must listen in good faith). Second, we must demand that students somehow share that connection with the audiences they address. Third, students must realize that they are not just giving a speech, they are attempting to persuade an audience. Thus, students ought to be able to explicitly articulate, in their speeches, 1) why they are speaking to the audience (persuasive purpose) and 2) what they hope to accomplish by speaking to the audience (persuasive goal). Students can do just that in creative and effective ways. Jay Brown gave "The Burning Question of Our Nation's Books" at the Interstate Oratory Contest in 1984. This text is taken from Gronbeck, et.al., Principles and Types of Speech Communication, 11th ed. (New York: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1990) 392-395. The

subject of his speech was the limited shelf life of twentieth century books:

> The dramatic deterioration of our nation's library holdings is a crisis which affects all of us who depend on books for information, entertainment, or aesthetic pleasure. Let me first explain what causes this deterioration and then discuss why current methods for dealing with it are inadequate. Thirdly, I'll explore why we are ignoring our written legacy, and finally, suggest what we must do to protect it in the future.

In a few sentences, Brown postures his intent. He includes the audience through active word choice, and engages listeners in a cooperative fashion. Brown does not explicitly outline his intent, but the content of this paragraph highlights that he observes a difference between where the audience is attitudinally, and where he would like them to be when he is done speaking. Another former student, Alan Jalowitz, does a fine job focusing on process in "Our Threatened Inheritance: In Support of an Independent Park Service" at Interstate in 1989 (Winning Orations, 1989, p 111-114). Jalowitz's speech focused on poor federal policy toward the National Parks system in the U.S.:

> I propose to convince you that we must remove the institutional threats to our nation's natural heritage by making the Park Service an independent agency. To do this, we must first define the philosophical conflict which plagues our parks. Then we will investigate the effects of economic use on the parks. Finally, we will analyze the steps our entire society must take to save our cultural heritage.

Jalowitz's persuasive goal is clear, he uses active and engaging language to delineate the audience's responsibility to consider his subject matter personally, and his organizational plan seems consistent with what he hopes to accomplish. At the very least,

the presentation of the thesis-preview in this speech is closer to operationalizing a transactional, cooperative approach to persuasive speaking, even if it is fractured by that good old problem-solution organizational pattern.

If coaches and judges encourage students to engage the process of persuasion, they also make their own commitment to honor and abide by their responsibility to actively engage. Therefore, coaches and judges deserve to hear statements that let them know where the speaker wishes them to be attitudinally and/or behaviorally, by the end of the presentation. Judging a competitive event like persuasive speaking does become tedious when the judge is not asked to engage, when judges are told quite early in persuasive speeches that they are present strictly to evaluate the students' command of evidence, argument, and speech structure.

In the final analysis, students just demonstrating to judges that that they have (or might not have) the tools to persuade is not what persuasive speaking was intended to be. Having tools is fine, but using them appropriately and effectively is another matter. At present, we ask students in persuasive speaking to acquire and show us the tools in their toolbox; we are not asking them to demonstrate their ability to use them. We <u>should</u> ask, and we should evaluate their skill in using the tools of persuasion, lest they attempt to use those tools in the future, and end up hurting themselves and others. Forensics educators have an ethical responsibility to assure that students know how

to use the tools of communication responsibly. If we do not, we have done our students and the larger society in which they live and communicate, the greatest disservice of all.

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